

# Militarization of Sikh Masculinity

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**ABSTRACT:** Critically reading the theoretical and descriptive scholarly work on colonial Punjab, Sikhs, Sikhism and the imperial British Empire, this paper traces how the formation of Sikh martial masculinity rooted in religious tradition was institutionalized into a particular form of militarized masculinity in the colonial period in Punjab, India. Additionally, it explores how the historical construction of masculinity intersects with the contemporary discourses on Sikh identity and masculinity in the diaspora, specifically in Britain. With reference to British Sikhs and their project of reclaiming recognition of their contribution in WWI, the paper goes on to argue that perhaps the projection of Khalsa identity as synonymous with Sikh identity and the performance of Sikh masculinity lies in projecting and representing themselves as warriors, to seek legitimacy from the military of their masculinity in exhibiting war effort.

**KEYWORDS:** masculinity, military, martial, Sikhs, Punjab, Khalsa

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The dominant perception of Sikhs as martial, brave and willing to sacrifice is reflected in popular culture at large. By extension and association, Punjab, seen as the homeland of Sikhs, finds itself venerated as the land of the brave, or the land of the lions, if you like. This idea of the Sikh identity and Sikh masculinity in particular is a very real form of consciousness which defines, shapes and configures Sikh masculinity and performance of the male self, and are ideas in which many Sikh men root their identity. As I have argued elsewhere, this particular masculine performance does draw its strength from religious rituals and practices.<sup>1</sup> It might not



be wrong to suggest that the dominant understanding of Sikh masculinity seems to be trapped within a martial Khalsa identity.<sup>2</sup> However it can also be traced to a very complicated relationship with the British in the colonial period.

Critically reading the theoretical and descriptive scholarly work on colonial Punjab, Sikhs, Sikhism and the imperial British Empire, I set out to trace how the formation of Sikh martial masculinity rooted in religious tradition was institutionalized into a particular form of militarized masculinity in the colonial period. Additionally, I also explore how the historical construction of masculinity intersects with the contemporary discourses on Sikh identity and masculinity in the diaspora, specifically in Britain. With reference to British Sikhs and their project of reclaiming recognition of their contribution in WWI, I go on to argue that perhaps the performance of Sikh masculinity lies in projecting and representing themselves as warriors, to seek legitimacy from the military of their masculinity in exhibiting war effort.

## Looking for the Martial and the Militarized

If we see masculinity as a set of gendered relations and practices, then the formation of Khalsa identity affects the body, identity and culture of the Sikhs. Khalsa martial identity is essentially embodied masculinity, which ascribes symbols and markers on the Khalsa body, and specifically the male body in this case.<sup>3</sup> The *Rahit Maryada* Code or *rahit namas*, with their elaborate injunctions sought to construct Khalsa identity, which was circumscribed by what they could and could not do. Additionally, it promoted a culture of martial valour, which placed an accent on bravery, heroism and the fight for justice against those who were seen as attacking the Sikh religion and empire.<sup>4</sup> This produced a very distinct form of Sikh martial masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

Military masculinity on the other hand is certainly distinct from martial masculinity, as the former refers to an institutionalized set of accepted practices and behaviors, which must conform to the military ideal of the masculine. Whereas the quality of being martial, as an ideal, as an aspiration may allude to any of these: combative, brave, heroic, valiant etc. Weber's work on different forms of authority for ruling legitimately is particularly useful here, for both religious leadership and military institutions (Guenther and Claus, 1978). Weber mentions the rational legal



form of authority, which finds its legitimacy from codes and principles, which have legal sanctions. Weber called this an authority, which draws from 'natural law', which leads to the development of a 'normative order' that leads people to accept proper behavior and action. It has been said that this type of authority is not based on 'religious morality' (Best, 2001, p. 13), but legal codes and rules, which govern behavior of a population. Since the military is a state institution, it wields rational legal authority. Consequently, military or army acts of violence carry state sanction, which legitimizes these acts by celebrating and rewarding acts of violence as 'valour'. On the other hand, martial identity and by extension, martial masculinity, might have cultural legitimacy or draw on traditional or charismatic authority, but it does not occupy the status accorded to militarized masculinity.

Belkin (2012) considers military masculinity as particular practices and beliefs, which provides men the ability to wield power and authority over others on the basis of their military service. He also argues that this can take multiple forms, with men positioning themselves along with the ideological construct of military institutions as inherently brave, authentic, powerful, respected and martial in nature. This conception of military masculinity helps in understanding the mutually beneficial relationship between the British state and Sikh recruits for instance. The practice and performance of Sikh martial masculinity is deeply rooted in the Sikh Rahit Maryada Code or the Khalsa Code as well as the teachings of the Gurus (Singh and Fenech, 2014). The questions that emerge from this are what idea of Sikh martial qualities did the British appropriate in the military and how did they in turn construct Sikh martial masculinity. Could it be argued that the British institutionalized Sikh martial masculinity into a decidedly militarized masculinity? Conversely, was there a disjuncture in the Sikh's conceptualization of their own martial masculinity from how the British positioned it?

Further elaborating on the function and operation of military masculinity, Belkin adds, 'The pursuit of masculine status has produced conformity and obedience not just through the disavowal of the unmasculine, but via the compelled embrace of the masculine/unmasculine and other oppositions which have been constructed as irreconcilable' (2012, p. 4). Thus in the context of Sikhs in Punjab, how did this overemphasis on Sikh martial masculinity (particularly the Jat Sikhs) subordinate other Sikh and non-Sikh groups? Where then does the performance of Sikh martial masculinity lie? Where can we locate its practice? The privileging

of Khalsa identity as *the* Sikh identity, thereby making the Khalsa Singh identity as the dominant and often hegemonic representation of Sikhism (Grewal, 1990; Oberoi, 1994; McLeod, 1996; Dhavan, 2011; Singh, 2014) also leads to the effacing of other subordinate identities within the community, which are not considered the 'pure' or 'authentic' forms of Sikhism. Another significant question is what were the historical and social processes responsible for this idea of Sikh martial identity, which were appropriated by the British? Was the martial race theory enough as an explanation, or were there other considerations which impinged on the decision to recruit Sikhs in the army?

These questions become relevant as the Khalsa Sikh identity was a very deliberate social construction of boundaries and fashioning of a distinct warrior identity, which was constantly in the process of making (Oberoi, 1994). When the British appropriated Khalsa identity, it begs the question of how and why did it happen? Was there conflict in this British appropriation? And more importantly did it really transform and solidify Sikh martial masculinity as a decidedly militarized masculinity?

Taking off from one of Connell's (1995) earlier arguments, masculinity cannot be conceived of in singular and stable terms. As an idea, as an ideological construct and as a performance, masculinities exist in their multiplicity. Masculinity in itself does not refer to a universally understood or accepted definition; there are different kinds of masculinities that exist across space and time. The articulations and performance of masculinities vary across time, region and specific contexts. What it means to be masculine in Punjab at a point in time might not hold true for Bengal, for example, a point eloquently argued by Sinha (1995).

While Sikh martial masculinity is not a universal category of masculinity, which can be attributed to all Sikhs at all times, as argued in the context of Sikh identity by Oberoi (1994), McLeod (1968, 1996 and 1997), Fox (1985) and some others, it is that one particular form of masculinity, which emerged at the intersection of religious, social, political and cultural factors. In a revisit to the ideas around masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that hegemonic masculinity (in singular) is a very particular and dominant form of masculinity. Hence it is crucial to unravel why Khalsa Sikh martial identity, and by extension, martial masculinity, became the dominant and hegemonic form of masculinity in Punjab.

Historically the formation of Sikh martial identity had developed its specific

contours in Punjab. Khalsa Sikhs specifically, were seen as formidable warriors. Working as mercenaries in the armies of Sikh chiefs was perhaps seen as enhancing the masculine status of this group (Roy, 2011). Hence the Khalsa Sikhs themselves acknowledged their own identity as a warrior group with distinct martial qualities (Soherwordi, 2010).

In the case of colonial Punjab, masculine power flowed through the network of disciplinary codes and institutions such as the military, the landed peasantry and tribal or customary law, and religious identity (Talbot, 1991). This circulation of masculine power reinforced and determined social relations and created certain subject positions. It has been argued that military modernity in the colonial period provided a possibility of ‘manhood enhancement’ and the idiom of ‘martial valor’ found much traction and support among people (Gupta, 2010, p. 324). Masculinity in the colonial discourse was constructed by juxtaposing it with ideas of femininity and holding superior the white Christian masculinity vis-à-vis the effeminate colonial subject (Sinha, 1995).

Any exploration of masculinities in Punjab needs to clearly foreground the colonial context of these formations as well as the role of British colonial administration in Punjab and the specific features of the administration that had an impact on Punjabi society and culture. Through looking at the role of the British administration with reference to militarization of Punjab, construction of the “martial caste” and/or “martial race”, and valorization of rural life, I hope to unearth some processes, which lead to particular formations of martial and military masculinity in Punjab, with certain masculine groups posited as dominant in opposition to subordinate groups.

## Punjab’s Annexation and the Mutiny of 1857

British annexation of Punjab, Pritam Singh (2008) argues, had three critical consequences. First, that even though the Sikh soldiers had been defeated, the British respected them for their bravery, and sought to enlist them in the army. I argue that the British deliberately employed this discourse of bravery so that they could patronize the Sikh soldiers and prevent an uprising from them, by privileging their Khalsa identity and also positing them in opposition to Hindus and Muslims. Secondly, Singh goes on to argue that since Sikhs were defeated by the Bengal army



in the Anglo-Sikh wars, this very grievance was used by the British for a third point, that is to make Sikhs allies of the British Empire and help defeat the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. So a contradiction emerged, while Sikhs were upset at the British annexation of their empire, the prospect of enlisting in the army and the benefits of a salary and land grants seemed to pacify them. Perhaps being a part of the army, gave them a sense of control over their bodies, and also legitimized their martial identity, which was recognized and nurtured by the state. This allowed them to uphold their existing “martial” identity while being militarized by the British.

After the mutiny of 1857, colonial rule in India repositioned various communities and classes as “loyal/traitorous” and “martial/effeminate”. The rural peasants in Punjab, majority of who were Jats, provided military support as irregular soldiers (they were partially mercenary and partially wage laborers) to the British army who were able to quell the revolt of 1857, and restore order in North West India and the Gangetic plain with their help. Chowdhury (2013) for instance, has argued that in the pre-colonial period, recruitment was more broad-based and generalized; however, during the colonial period, Jats and more importantly, Sikh Jats in particular were transformed from the martial identity that they were perceived to have occupied to a more militarized identity where their martial identity was institutionalized by their recruitment in the army. It is said that entire *biradaris* or coparcener groups became rural collaborators and benefitted in terms of low rung administrative posts and military employment as well as land grants. This was also the basis for the ideological underpinnings of the view that rural peasants were martial, hard-working and sturdy and hence highly appropriate for recruitment into the military. This led to the Punjabisation of the army after 1857 and keeping control over Punjab allowed the British to continue to wield control over the North of India (Roy, 2011).

Thereafter the Bengal army began recruiting from Punjab. The Bengali was demonized and seen as “undisciplined”, rogue and defiant, and since the Punjabis had helped fight against the sepoys, they were seen as trustworthy and “loyal” (Soherwordi, 2010). Hence it is important to note that for the British, loyalty was an important component of ‘ideal’ martial masculinity. Soherwordi further argues that as a result recruitment shifted geographically, from Bengal to Punjab and then began the process of othering. The educated, politically aware Bengali, and upper-caste Brahmins were projected as “effeminate”, and this very process of othering

was used to construct other groups as more “martial” in opposition to them. For instance, Sinha (1995) has looked at how the dynamics of colonial and nationalist politics can be understood best from the lens of colonial masculinity for it constituted both the British colonizer and native colonized as the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali” respectively.

## Construction of the ‘Martial Race’ Ideology

The British, in their recruitment policies, were very careful in studying and classifying the various castes, communities, religions and groups in Punjab, and factored that into their assumptions about each community. Gand and Wagner (2012) note that Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief of the Bengal Army, a prominent military voice, believed that keeping a mix of various castes and races was not ideal since it would mean that the best men were not fighting. Hence it was decided that they should make regiments on the basis of their best men, to fight the possible Russian invasion. Roberts believed that the Gurkhas, Sikhs, some Punjabi Muslims, and Pathans as groups or races were intrinsically superior warriors than others, that they could bear arms, and that they had physical courage to do so. They were seen to hold “martial” qualities and came to be known as ‘martial races’ (Omissi, 1995; Cohen, 2001; Roy, 2006 and 2011; Streets, 2004).

It has been argued that the British saw the caste system as a hierarchy of who worked better than the others, and believed that the distinction of the Kshatriya or warrior caste in the system was indeed true and indicated people who were better at fighting (Chowdhury, 2012). This could be a possible reason, however, this does not adequately explain the inclusion of Muslims and high-caste Brahmins. Alternatively, it is possible that after the revolt of the Bengal Army, the strategic importance of the region of Punjab grew, and the British thought it fit to elevate the loyal rural Punjabi peasant-soldier as exemplar in opposition to the deliberate construction of the debased ‘effeminate’ Bengali.

As I pointed out in the beginning of this section, it became a critical exercise for the British to study and gather knowledge about the people they governed, and it often led to the use of stereotypes to label and classify communities. Roy (2011) similarly notes that the British took great pains in carefully documenting and recording the various castes in Punjab, their characteristics, their origin, oc-



cupation patterns and customs, and in many ways ethnographic studies marked an important aspect of the colonial government. This excerpt below from a report highlights the process by which the British marked various castes in Punjab and imbued them with characteristics which guided administrative decisions and hiring practices. Through this detailed recording and observation, the British theorized on the various groups, castes and sub-castes for purposes of social and political control.

The Bania with his sacred thread, his strict Hinduism, and his twice-born standing, looks down on the Jat as a Sudra. But the Jat looks down upon the Bania as a cowardly spiritless money-grubber, and society in general agrees with the Jat. The Khatri who is far superior to the Bania in manliness and vigour, probably takes precedence of the Jat. But among the races or tribes of purely Hindu origin, I think the Jat stands next after the Brahman, the Rajput and the Khatri.<sup>6</sup>

McLain, for instance, looks at how General Sir George MacMunn's commentary on martial races often contrasted dark-skinned slightly-built southern Indians with the light-skinned, physically endowed northern Indian, calling them 'Aryan tribes, of a high grade ... Aryan beauty and physiognomy of the Greek' (2014, p. 46) McLain calls this the "imperial masculine ethos" that made the British believe that only they could lead Asian soldiers (2014, p. 49). Further he adds that in the colonial discourse the word *lala* was used derisively, and alluded to the *bania* caste, which were considered shrewd, lazy, educated and "effeminate". The martial race theory further segregated the Indian population, which was already divided across caste and class points as the British manipulated the idea of masculinity to call a certain population "effeminate" and prevent them from coming together and waging a war against the empire, and calling a population masculine by heralding them as exemplar, however at the same time controlling both.

The British had realized that keeping order and control over Punjab required the compliance and loyalty of rural Punjab, and hence the valorization of rural life and rural folk over urban dwellers became a compulsion. The Jats assumed significant importance since they were a land-owning group, and wielded much influence. Additionally, the Jat peasantry, the figure of the toiling peasant and able-bodied farmer who was loyal and hardworking gained much respect from the

British. The Sikh Jats who followed the Khalsa principles, the Hindu Jats and the Muslim tribes from the Salt Range conformed to the template of exemplar masculinity imagined by the British. In opposition to them, the Dalits, Banias and Punjabi Hindus (mostly Khatris) were offered the subject position of a subordinate abject masculinity.

Yong (2005) argues that Jat Sikhs were privileged because they were considered to be 'socially dominant and militaristic' (2005, p. 72). Further, since they followed the Khalsa norms, they were assumed to embody martial characteristics. In fact, he goes on to suggest that with Jat peasants entering the fold of Sikhism, the religion itself became "militarized". And importantly, some of the assumptions about the characteristics of Jat peasants as being inherently "martial" were later reproduced in colonial accounts.

Colonial accounts helped produce notions about the qualities which different groups were presumed to possess, thereby attributing martial qualities to certain groups, Jat Sikhs for instance, and also suggesting that this colonial construction was constant across time and stood true for all Jat Sikh. These historical social constructions produced a hegemonic template, which treated Sikh martial masculinity as exemplar and relegated other groups to a subordinate position. The ethnographic surveys translated into logical arguments for changing recruitment policies and only enlisting certain 'martial races' by attributing to them inherent qualities such as 'masculinity, fidelity, bravery and loyalty' (Yong, 2005, p. 65).

## The Cracks in the 'Martial' Race Narrative

The 'martial race' theory has been interpreted variously and has been used as a lens to understand the functioning of the colonial government as well as military recruitment. Dominant discourse around the 'martial race' theory takes it as a fixed notion, which was seamlessly adopted by the British. In this section I hope to show how the 'martial race' theory was used as a manipulative framework by the British, and how even the martial race theory was riddled with contradictions and ruptures, and was not as seamlessly employed as it has been presented and that it should not be taken unquestioningly as a frame of analysis.

For many scholars the 'martial race' theory was arbitrary, and some argue that the indigenous native traditions shaped it, while some others believe that it was



strategic and geared not just for military purposes, but also for administration and management of civil relations. There is one argument, like that of Marston and Sundaram (2008) which suggests that the martial race theory was used to stomp nationalism in India, and that in many ways the imperial power sought to divide the population to prevent them from coming together and organize against the British, by pitting one against the other. This argument tends to consider the martial race theory as purely hegemonic and ideological, which tended to stereotype a group, without any actual bearing. It is argued that the British believed that their rule was imperative to save the non-martial groups from the possible aggression by martial races. Additionally, this strategy is seen as fostering caste, race and tribal ties of loyalty, where as it is argued that such divisions were not so sharp but were exacerbated by the British.

There is another perspective, which Roy (2011) calls the Functionalist argument which argues that certain visible characteristics of the Indian society as well as the requirements of ruling India, led to the martial race theory. Cohen (2001) for instance has suggested that the predilection for the martial race theory resulted from two situations: one, the armed peasantry, which was considered militaristic, and second, the rise of nationalism. He points out that this was done to stifle any political movement towards nationalism by exclusively recruiting from certain groups. It is believed that it was the very cleavages present in traditional society, which were further exploited by the British and that the present caste system had already differentiated between the martial and non-martial in the form of caste. Omissi (1995) in a similar framework looks at the social and political considerations behind military recruitment policies. He argues that only those groups initially enlisted in the army who saw the gains in military service. He also suggests that the British, offered privileges to only a few after enlistment, which earned them the loyalty of a few groups. He emphasizes that the Indian army was constantly evolving, and the initial shift in recruitment from Punjab was less because of martial race ideology, but for political, social and pragmatic reasons. He suggests that the more focused martial race ideology was used for many reasons: the first was territorial since there was an impending threat of Russian invasion, the second was due to the Mutiny, the balance shifted towards more 'martial', or loyal groups. He points out that a lot of military decisions were based on anthropological and ethnographic work done by the colonial administration. Thereon he ar-

gues that this ideology was codified, and stamped with official approval, and institutionalized, by putting it in recruitment handbooks and this theory also became a form of political control. Roy (2011) points that there has already been precedence of peasants working as mercenaries and the unstable nature of monsoons, and uncertainty over agriculture, is the reason why a lot of peasants were pushed into military service even before the British.

How was the category of race and racial ideologies understood and used by the British in the Indian context? Offering an explanation Streets (2004) points out that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, deliberations on 'race' were first marked by 'objective' biological considerations, but situated within the context of racial ideologies, and secondly, race was a highly manipulative category used strategically by imperial powers. She calls for deconstructing the romanticized notion of the martial race theory to unravel how Punjabi Sikhs, Gurkhas and Scottish Highlanders came to be considered as the most sought-after soldiers in the British Empire. In her understanding this stemmed from the ideology of the 'martial races' or the 'martial race' theory propounded by the British and used strategically to suggest that some groups, owing to biological and cultural factors, were inherently better fighters. Additionally, she says that this martial race theory should be seen in the light of the fear of a possible Russian invasion in colonial India and the British fear of a French or German attack in Britain and this impending threat was seen as a reason to shape new recruitment policy. She points out that the Sikhs, for instance, were made to 'perform' this martial race theory, by wearing uniforms, pledging their loyalty to the unit, and working on that identity of *being* a martial soldier.

The seamless application of this 'martial race' theory has also been challenged for instance by Gajendra Singh (2013) who argues that the British conception of 'martialness' was not static, and hence there were shifts in the discourse of the martial warrior, from 1857 till 1947. He situates the British martial conception of the Sikhs historically by discussing how the East India Company, after the annexation of Punjab in 1849 had to raise regiments to govern the province. He remarks that at that point Sikhs were considered to have an antagonistic relationship with the East India Company. However, a few hundred Sikh men were raised in the infantry and cavalry. It is only with the Mutiny of 1857 that the Sikhs came to be heralded as the martial class par excellence. He quotes the report of Friedrich Engels published in The New York Tribune in 1958 to demonstrate the ambivalence of the



British towards the Sikhs, while they acknowledged their martial qualities, they were unsure of their loyalty and wondered if they would turn against them.<sup>7</sup>

Singh further argues that if one studies the recruitment handbooks and manuals, it becomes evident that the British not only compartmentalized the population between 'martial' and 'non-martial,' but also categorized populations on their future prospects of being 'martial'. The not-so desired aspects of those groups would then be "discarded, re-found or reproduced" accordingly (2013, p. 115). He discusses the recruitment practices of Frederick Roberts, who after becoming the commander-in chief in 1885 made use of the census of 1883, to label tribes and castes by ascribing separate characteristics to them. He says that this was followed by creation of military knowledge in the form of the *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Sikhs* written by A.H. Bingley in 1899. In this handbook, Bingley, Singh argues, describes various kinds of Sikhs by making distinctions between Sikh Brahmins who were derided for their caste bias, Sikh Khatri for being lazy and their reluctance in taking to physical work and Sikh Mazbhis were painted as criminals. However, it was the Jat Sikh, who was praised. He argues that this was perhaps because the colonial administration privileged the hard laboring, peasant body, who was considered benign and easy to manipulate.

Singh (2013), quotes from a report by Lepel Griffin which gives a graphic description of how Jat Sikhs were perceived:

'Hardy, brave and of intelligence too slow to understand when he is beaten, obedient to discipline, devotedly attached to his officers, and careless of the caste prohibitions ... can be controlled ... unsurpassed as a soldier.' (p. 118)

This also throws light on what the British conceived as the 'ideal' soldier body. Their idea of militarized masculinity was one which was obedient, could be controlled and disciplined. In the British conceptualization of Sikh martial body is their understanding of Jat Sikhs as slow-witted, easy to control, temperamental but loyal.

Gajendra Singh (2013) also points out that the martial qualities imputed to the Sikhs, were in fact variable. Since for the British, loyalty was an important martial quality, the perception of Sikhs as martial was changing especially after the First World War. While the Khalsa Sikhs were praised as 'lions' who fought for the British

admirably, the events leading to the Ghadar Movement, civil disobedience, and the Jallianwallan 'Bagh carnage, made the British re-think their conceptualization of Jat Sikhs as martial and loyal.<sup>8</sup>

Singh (2013) quotes from a report of the East India Sedition Committee, 1918, appointed to investigate Revolutionary Conspiracies in India:

With the high-spirited and adventurous Sikhs, the interval between thought and action is short. If captured by inflammatory appeals they are prone to act with all possible celerity and in a fashion dangerous to the whole fabric of order and constitutional rule. (p. 118)

Gajendra Singh (2013) further argues that after the Mutiny of 1857, there were micro-discourses, which positioned only certain Sikhs as 'martial', in order to justify the recruitment policies of the British, which focused on specific castes and regions. The recruitment policies dictating recruitment from only certain 'martial' groups with specific requirements of height and weight were changed after the First World War, and were revised in the Second World War, and were completely retracted in the 1940s.

Roy (2006) similarly makes a case for a more nuanced understanding of the construction and operation of the martial race theory and moves away from the nationalist frame or the functionalist approach to understand the reason and implications of the martial race theory. He believes that the military recruitment policies of the British can be seen as a struggle between competing discourses. He argues that it was not as fixed or certain as it has been described or discussed, and in fact was mutable. He posits that while there were those who argued for the martial race framework for recruiting, there is also an anti-martial race lobby or the ones who favored a more balanced approach to recruitment, especially in the Bombay and Madras armies. After the Bengal mutiny, he points that the proponents of the balanced approach did gain some traction, only to be swept by the hegemonic discourse of martial theory propagated by General Roberts.

Despite broadening the recruitment base to include the entire region of Punjab, religious identity of Khalsa Sikhs continued to be a significant factor, which was valued by the British in their recruitment policy as well as their understanding of Sikhs as a 'martial' race. For the British, Sikh martial masculinity, flowed from their religious identity as Khalsa Sikhs, hence it has been shown that the army went to great lengths in order to preserve and uphold the Khalsa identity of their



Sikh recruits. Gajendra Singh (2013) notes that Major A.E. Barstow was entrusted with the task of revising Bingley's handbook titled *Sikhs*. It came out in 1928, and reproduced much of the book in terms of Sikh history and tradition. However, in describing Sikhs, it sought to distinguish between the 'pure' Sikhs and the ones who had 'fallen back' into Hinduism. Singh notes that in his book, Barstow argued that in order to maintain the 'martialness' of Sikhs, it is important to preserve their rituals and traditions, for instance the *amrit* ceremony, the reverence to Guru Granth Sahib in the regiment, and encouraging the sense of separate nation among them. Singh also notes that Barstow believed that any 'relapse' into Hinduism is bound to significantly reduce their 'martialness' and status as a martial race. (p. 118–119) Further Barstow argued that Sikhs needed to be properly managed, and given a direction, otherwise they could turn against the British. Singh shows how for Barstow, Sikhs represented unbound martiality, which had a tendency to fall into, for instance, Bolshevism, and had to be contained and properly channeled and disciplined through military service. He demonstrates how for Barstow, Punjab was a fertile ground for Bolshevism, due to its resemblance to the interiors of Russia, similar agricultural conditions as well as in terms of Sikhism and its close proximity to the principles of Bolshevism. From 1916 onwards, some of the earlier race restrictions were removed and voluntary enlistment of Sikhs waned after World War I (Singh, 2013). This he argues was because Sikh Jats came to be seen as seditious or secessionists, while they were warriors but they could not be trusted.

Previously, I have discussed how multiple masculinities exist in the military, where men seem to occupy different positions at different points of time. The social construction of Sikhs as a 'martial' race, as I have demonstrated through the changing recruitment practices, was not fixed or static, and responded to changing circumstances and situation. The privileging of Sikh masculinity happened in a complex set of social and cultural circumstances, where their privileging required the deriding of high-caste Hindus in Bengal. Further, my earlier argument that identities are not fixed, and constantly in the making, is evident when the British no longer held the 'loyal' Sikh soldier in high regard. At this point, other marginal identities, which earlier did not find a place or were not offered a place in the mesh of military masculinity, for instance Mazhabi Sikhs and low-caste Hindus, found a place to occupy.

## Memorializing militarized masculinity

In July 2014 an exhibition in the UK recalled the contribution of Indian Sikhs in the British Army while serving in the Western Front in WW1 as part of the 58th Vaughan's Rifles. Coinciding with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of WW1, the exhibition was a part of an on-going project, 'Empire, Faith and War: The Sikhs and World War One' organized by the United Kingdom Punjab Heritage Association and included artist sketches, portraits and photographs that were on display. This three-year-long project has undertaken archives of photographs ranging from the 15th century to 1918. Other artifacts including uniforms and gallantry models are also on display. The motivation behind the exhibition is to highlight the heroism and sacrifice of Sikhs during the WW1, which according to the association has hitherto been undervalued.

The idea and intent behind the exhibition that is intended to make the Sikhs and the world reflect on Sikh contribution in the British Army. It is a very intriguing project partly because of the systematic way in which the project aims to unearth and commemorate memories and also partly because this initiative is undertaken by migrants living in the UK, and this is the way they choose to remember home and their roots and build a sense of identity, and at the same time to insert themselves into the histories of commemorations of their adopted homes. Certainly, the exhibition shows that they want to memorialize the idea of Sikhs as a martial race and reinstate the idea of Sikhs as warriors.

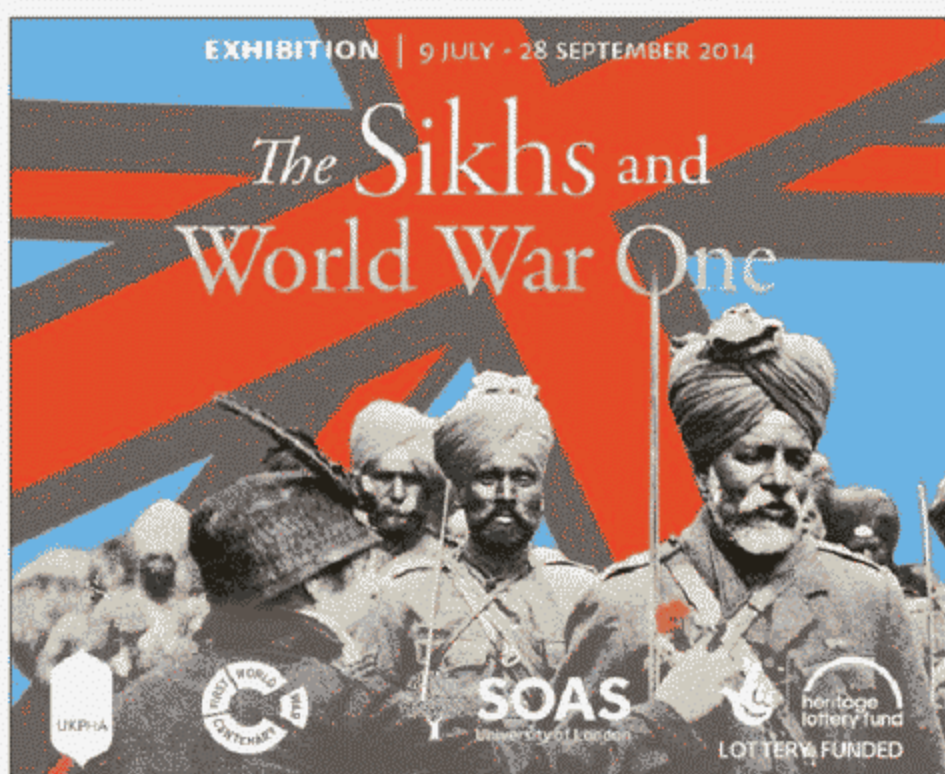


Fig. 1 The poster of the exhibition 'The Sikhs and World War One', <http://www.empirefaithwar.com/> (accessed 29th January, 2015)

Figure 1 is a poster from the exhibition, which includes a photograph of a French woman, pinning a flower on a Sikh soldier's uniform in 1916 during their march in France after the conclusion of WW1. The soldiers of the Sikh regiment fought against the Germans on the Western front. Titled 'Stalwarts from the East: A French lady pins a flower on the Sikh saviours of France', places emphasis on Sikhs as loyal, reliable, and sturdy men who *saved* France (emphasis added).



The description of the project is almost a reclamation exercise, to reclaim the lost glory of Sikhs, to re-inscribe it with passion and fervor, to etch it in popular memory again, and to commemorate a certain idea of Sikhism, of masculinity of the Sikh race and the Sikh body in particular.

The context of the exhibition being displayed in the UK by the migrant community also speaks to the idea of multiculturalism and the attempt by British Sikhs to seek recognition for their contribution as well as build better relations with the English. This then can also be seen as an exercise at assimilation, to obliterate the taint of being illegal migrants.<sup>9</sup> This enterprise of archiving and memorializing this particular aspect of Sikh history makes me reflect on why the community continues to be so invested in hyper-masculinizing its men. What prompts immigrants to remember or memorialize their pasts in this fashion? Is it perhaps only because they are immigrants who feel a sense of loss and distance from the country and hence this leads to painting this particular picture, which at once elevates their status as world warriors and also links them to the bravery of their ancestors? Is it an exercise to reclaim their own history or place within the larger Sikh tradition, of perhaps also connecting with their own version of Sikh history which places an accent on the 'martial'? I will come back to this at a later point, where I will demonstrate how this current articulation differs slightly from how the British projected the Sikhs and other 'martial castes'.

This exhibition provides an important opportunity and entry into questions on historical social construction of martial masculinity, historical memory and experiences of war. The exhibition, which seeks to highlight contributions of Indians, also exposes itself to contradictions in the archiving and documenting of military contribution. It offers an uncritical subject position to the viewer, asking them to consume these images without the subtext of the imperial invasion, oriental gaze and racism encountered by the soldiers and the actual experience of war lived by the soldiers. Couching it in a narrative of bravery and recouping their 'lost' memory, this exhibition seems to erase the contradictions, which emerged from the experience of war, such as racism, doubt and fear. It also asks the viewers and the community (in India and abroad) to uncritically embrace the martial race epithet, without offering a space for contesting these labels. Was the enlistment entirely voluntary and out of choice or were there other compulsions, which impinged on the decision to join the army? Were the soldiers sure of their purpose and partici-

pation in the war or were they doubtful and feared for their lives and worried for their families? I shall raise some of these questions in the later sections.

## In Lieu of a Conclusion

While it is true that the British employed the 'martial race' theory, and it led to solidifying of a particular form of Sikh martial identity, was it an identity just thrust upon them? The Sikh martial orientation did not emerge in a vacuum and social and political circumstances led to the emergence of the Khalsa tradition, and provided a more 'martial' orientation of the community, which the British appropriated. The Sikhs then actively worked upon this identity, by working as Khalsa warriors and mercenaries, by enlisting in the army and self-identifying themselves as a martial community that was habituated to war, and upholding those ideals and notions. There was intention in embracing that identity and making it their own. In the range of choices available to them, they chose the image of warriors, among others. In this sense hegemonic masculinity then also creates a space for men to assume multiple identities at a given point of time and choose a position, which is the most beneficial.

Towards the end of the essay, I discussed the WWI exhibition in the UK to commemorate the contribution of Sikhs during WWI coinciding with the centenary celebrations, held from 9<sup>th</sup> July to 28<sup>th</sup> September 2014 at Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London, UK. This exhibition was organized by the UK Punjab Heritage Association. The founding members of the organization are a group of young Sikhs born in Britain. The organization seeks to recover the 'lost' heritage of Punjab, in terms of its culture and language, and bring them to the British-born Punjabis in the UK. It is important to note that they choose to celebrate the martial persona and militarized identity of Sikhs, which initially developed as an anti-state identity (fighting against the Mughals), but was appropriated by the British for fighting for the colonial state. It is interesting to note that the Sikh Punjabi migrant population in the UK currently seeks to memorialize the efforts of their ancestors in keeping the Empire together, and conforming to the same template of masculinity which the British provided to them, without positioning it expressly as the Khalsa identity, which came to be branded as a deviant masculinity in post-independence India. Hence this exercise can be read as an exercise of reclamation as warriors, loy-



alists and contributors to the British, but not their identity as militant Khalsa Sikhs. The Sikhs currently seem to be embracing a militarized citizenship, wherein they seem to be displaying their past efforts and future potential as military recruits for the British. Is it perhaps that even as legal immigrants they seek a way to legitimize their status as citizens by joining military service or positioning themselves as historical allies of the British? Currently in the US, Britain and Canada (countries with the highest percentage of immigrant Sikhs) there is no longer a tradition of conscription, and consequently no pressure on the citizens to demonstrate their patriotic allegiance to the country. What then drives this process of reclamation, considering that there was a disjuncture in the Sikh's conceptualization of their own martial masculinity from how the British positioned it? Some of these questions require greater examination for another stage.

For the British, Sikh martial masculinity was something to be channeled, disciplined, trained and tamed. The loyalty of Sikh soldiers was constitutive of the militarized masculinity that they imagined and constructed. As soldiers they were heralded as warriors, and physically brave, but official reports reflect that they were thought of as 'slow', with brawn, but no brains. On the other hand, the Sikh's perception of their martial masculinity before the colonial period involved plundering and looting (Dhavan, 2011), and in the colonial period, fighting in the battlefield as great Khalsa soldiers and upholding the pride of their Khalsa identity.

It is believed that Sikhism intrigued the British, due to its close resemblance to Christianity. Jakobsh (2003) has also argued that for the British, the martial hues of Sikh religion corresponded to their own "militarized/masculinized" (2003, p. 59) understanding of religion. This is a critical point because there was a transformation of Khalsa Sikhs from the time of Ranjit Singh's empire, till their entry into the British army, slowly from being martial, they were getting militarized, this institutionalization of their martial identity getting furthered during the British times. Sikhism is often seen as exclusively masculine and martial in its imagery and there was perhaps a relationship of mutual admiration between the Sikhs and the British.

In the colonial reports on the martial races and the Sikhs discussed before, the one recurrent theme is the conjunction of the ideal martial body with the idea of loyalty. In their documentation and remarks about the Sikhs and other 'martial races', the official colonial discourse speaks of martial masculinity that refers to

someone who is able-bodied and is habituated to war, but at the same time can be trained, disciplined and tamed. Even though it seems that the British sought to privilege the 'martial' character of some races and their 'manliness', the British wanted subservience. Of course the Sikh's understanding of their martial masculinity also flows from their Khalsa identity. They saw themselves as elite warriors, who were trained in warfare, were brave and physically strong and would fight for justice. The Khalsa traditions that came up in opposition to the state, where martial traditions were seen in terms of 'defending' the community against the violence of the state, were not necessarily in sync with the British idea of orderliness and obedience. Thus two 'versions' of being martial seemed to exist simultaneously; it is the disjunctions and ruptures between these two versions that are important to explore in greater detail than is possible here.

It is decidedly the hyper-masculine and martial understanding of Sikhs and Sikhism that the colonial state privileged and sought to nurture and protect. In my discussion on formation of masculinities, specifically in the colonial period, I have argued that masculine identities were restructured and dictated by British notions of hyper-masculinity. The use of categories such as 'martial' and 'effeminate' by the British, were forms of social control. Additionally, within the military there are multiple competing masculinities, with the British officers occupying a dominant position with their understanding of masculinity flowing from notions of white muscular Christianity, and casting the 'martial races' as a reflection of that image, but an image that is never truly at the same level as that of the British. Even in an understanding of Sikh martial masculinity as a hegemonic form of masculinity within the context of Punjab, it is important to also locate it within the matrix of other relations, such as those with their colonial officers, who occupied a dominant position in comparison to them. This critically points out that in a given space and time, there may be multiple masculinities, which may or may not be placed in a hierarchy, based on varying levels of dominance and subordination between men and women.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Kohli, Aakriti. Forthcoming. "Constructing the Ideal Sikh: Historiographies of Sikh Martial Traditions." *Intellectual Resonance* presents a detailed discussion on the historiographies of Sikh martial traditions, historical and social processes which lead to the formation of a



particular Sikh martial masculinity and identity. It argues that the cultural transformation of Sikh identity, the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the emergence of the Tat Khalsa and the Singh Sabha movement produced a hegemonic image of Sikh identity and masculinity.

- <sup>2</sup> Kohli, Aakriti. 2016. "Who can be a Sikh?" *Raiot*. Accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2016. <http://raiot.in/who-can-be-a-sikh/>
- <sup>3</sup> The term Khalsa is derived from Arabic and means *khalis* or pure. During the Mughal rule, *khalsa* meant the land, which directly belonged to the Mughal ruler, hence *khalsa* in the Sikh context also referred to allegiance to the Guru directly and not the intermediaries or *masands*. According to Guru Gobind Singh, the baptized Sikhs who followed all the injunctions were his Khalsa. (W.H. McLeod. 2004. *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*. Delhi: Oxford University Press)
- <sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on this please see, Grewal, J.S. 1990. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II.3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Grewal, J.S. 1997. *Historical Perspectives on Sikh Identity*. Patiala: Punjabi University.
- <sup>5</sup> Dominance within the Sikh *panth* can be seen in the form of projecting the Khalsa identity as the normative male identity imbued with a martial masculinity. This is visible from the order of following the Five Ks, the *rahitnamas* and the Singh Sabha and Tat Khalsa's move towards projecting an 'authentic' Sikh identity, which sought to define and authorize the meaning and being of a 'Sikh'. For a detailed discussion on Tat Khalsa and its role in projecting Khalsa identity as the normative identity in Sikhism see Oberoi (1994). For a greater discussion on the historiography of the Singh Sabha and the Tat Khalsa ideals, please see Singh and Barrier (1999)
- <sup>6</sup> H.A Rose, Denzil Ibbetson and Edward Douglas Maclagan. 1991. *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province*. Volume 1, 2 and 3. Lahore : Printed by the superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab (p. 867)
- <sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence, 1857–1859* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, reprint 1988), p. 152. cited in Singh, Gajendra. 2013. "Finding those Men with 'Guts': The Ascription and Re-ascription of Martial Identities in India after the Uprising" In Rand, Gavin and Bates, Crispin. Eds *Mutiny at the Margins: New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857* (New Delhi: Sage), (p. 116).
- <sup>8</sup> The Ghadar movement was started by Punjabi Indians living in the United States and Canada, against the British rule in India. The members of the Ghadar Party were predominantly Sikhs, but also included members from other groups. Their active rebellion against the British in Punjab in 1915 was seen as an act of disaffection against the British. In the Jallianwala Bagh carnage in 1919, civilians gathered in the park for Baisakhi celebrations were fired upon by the British Indian Army who had banned all meetings for the fear of an insurrection. These two events worked towards making visible Sikh disaffection against the British, and made the British question the loyalty and by extension the martial qualities of the Sikhs.
- <sup>9</sup> While it is true that the exhibition is mounted by those who are not illegal themselves, but the distancing from the taint of those who might be illegal – or the distancing from

the clustering of all migrants as essentially tainted by illegal passage – is an essential part of the ‘message’ in the display.

## Image Reference

Figure 1. *Stalwarts from the East: A French lady pins a flower on the Sikh saviours of France, Paris*. (Poster) <http://www.empirefaithwar.com/> (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2015). The poster of the exhibition includes the photograph of a French woman pinning a flower on a Sikh soldier.

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